

Newborn Suffocates Between Sleeping Parents

The infant had been sleeping with the couple at a Torrance hospital. It was the third such death in as many days.

By Rong-Gong Lin II
Times Staff Writer

August 10, 2006

Carlos Franco didn't live long enough to see his first sunrise.

Only hours old, the infant apparently suffocated after slipping between his sleeping parents in a shared bed at Torrance Memorial Medical Center, authorities said Wednesday.

The child's death over the weekend appears to have been an accident, but police said they were awaiting the Los Angeles County coroner's autopsy results for confirmation.

Carlos was born at 9:20 a.m. Saturday. After a feeding around midnight, the infant's parents, both juveniles from Long Beach whose identities were withheld, climbed into the hospital bed and went to sleep, police said.

"The father put the baby on a pillow on his chest," said Torrance Police Officer Dave Crespin. "Mom woke up at 2:30 a.m. and found the baby in between both of them. The baby was not breathing."

The child was pronounced dead at 3:38 a.m.

In a statement, the hospital said it has a policy and practice of cautioning new parents against sleeping in the bed with an infant "because of the risk to the baby of accidental death."

Citing patient confidentiality rules, spokeswoman Ann O'Brien said the hospital could not confirm whether it warned the parents about its policy.

Lea Brooks, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Health Services, said she could not comment on whether her agency would investigate the hospital to determine if it followed its policy.

The fatality was the third in as many days involving a Los Angeles County infant who died after sharing a bed with an adult, said Craig Harvey, a spokesman for the coroner.

On Friday, Daisy Lynn Harper of Los Angeles died 26 days after she was born. A day later, Dayanara Cervantes of La Puente, who was 46 days old, also died. Both infants died at home.

Bed sharing is being investigated as a factor in all three deaths, Harvey said.

Investigators are awaiting lab tests before ruling on the causes, which could take six to eight weeks, he said.

These incidents underscore the dangers of infant bed sharing.

"The evidence is growing that bed sharing, as practiced in the United States and other Western countries, is more hazardous than the infant sleeping on a separate sleep surface," the American Academy of Pediatrics warned in a policy statement published last year.

Most U.S. hospitals do not permit infants to sleep in the bed with their parents, said Dr. Rangasamy Ramanathan, director of the newborn intensive care unit at Los Angeles County USC Medical Center.

"This is definitely a no-no," he said. "Hospital beds are for one adult. There's hardly any space for a baby.... It doesn't take much to suffocate a newborn baby."

Yet discouraging infant bed sharing has been controversial, as some parents believe there are benefits.

One study published in the May issue of Pediatrics showed that bed sharing infants "engaged in more feeding and more infant-mother interactions than cot-sleep infants." Also, as breastfeeding has become more popular, studies show that bed sharing has increased in the U.S.

A separate study published in 2003 showed that the percentage of infants sharing an adult bed overnight jumped from 5.5% in 1993 to 12.8% in 2000.

Still, the safest place for a newborn infant to sleep is in a crib in the same room as the parents, said Dr. Angelika Rampal, assistant clinical professor of pediatrics at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital.

But if parents choose to sleep with their infants in the same bed, experts said they should avoid fluffy pillows, stuffed animals and loose blankets or sheets. More than one adult in the bed is especially hazardous.

Rampal said it is now common practice for healthy newborns to sleep in a crib in the same hospital room as their mother, a change from the old practice of keeping newborns in a nursery.

*

(INFOBOX BELOW)

Q & A

Question: Is it safe for one or both parents to sleep with their newborn child?

Answer: Sleeping with infants can be dangerous because of the potential for overheating, rollovers and suffocation. Though some parents believe that sleeping with a child promotes bonding and may be necessary for breastfeeding, experts say it is safer for a newborn to sleep in a crib separate from the parents' bed.

Q: What sorts of precautions should be taken when sharing a bed with an infant?

A: If you choose to have your baby sleep in bed with you to breastfeed, make sure the infant sleeps on his or her back. Avoid soft surfaces, pillows and loose bed covers. Make sure that your baby can't get trapped between the mattress and the headboard or footboard, a wall or other furniture.

Q: What sleep position is recommended for infants?

A: Research has shown that babies sleep more safely on their backs on firm bedding. Healthy babies automatically swallow or cough up fluids. There has been no increase in choking or other problems for babies who sleep on their backs. Babies who usually sleep on their backs but then are placed on their stomachs are at high risk for sudden infant death syndrome, or crib death.

Q: What are ideal sleep conditions for babies?

A: Infants should sleep in a crib or bassinet, not on a couch or armchair with adults or other children. They should be dressed in light sleepwear, and the room should be kept at a comfortable temperature. Keep soft objects, toys and loose bedding out of the sleep area.

Source: Times reporting

Los Angeles Times